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ABSTRACT

Remedial reading, or the teaching of the ability to decode and comprehend, taxes the skills and ingenuity of the English teacher. This problem, however, must be tackled on a day-to-day basis. Remedial reading programs can be made effective by utilizing the following techniques: a daily 5-minute quiz which embraces previously covered material; a brief period of dictation, which emphasizes accuracy; improvised lessons on verb tenses, using the students' daily notes; games; student-created booklets or other projects to be completed at home; at least three totally different tasks to be completed during every class period; exercises to develop basic skills, which is the most important phase of any reading program; and developing a cordial atmosphere where true learning can take place. (DB)

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Remedial Reading in the English Class

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It is becoming increasingly apparent that reading instruction in the public school system is failing to accomplish the goals which

for years have been taken for granted by parents and educators alike. Students enter high school without the minimal reading skills needed to insure academic survival. Comprehension and inference skills are sadly lacking and in some extreme cases the most basic reading skill, the abilty to decode the printed word, is either inadequate or altogether absent. The schools have succeeded in recent years in producing a generation of young adults who cannot or will not read. The reasons for this lamentable failure, Marshall McLuhan aside, can be argued to no satisfactory conclusion. The parents blame the schools and the teachers decry the lack of parental involvement. Amidst the furor of this bipartisan exchange, the administration desperately expends large sums of money to institute various remedial programs and to purchase the latest in individualized and packeted instructional materials.

Unfortunately, these programs often lack any clearly articulated goal. Merely to improve the students' ability to read is a vague and poorly defined aim. Yet most remedial programs begin with this as their projected end. Such a goal is open to wide and varied interpretation and lacks the concreteness which will insure that certain materials be covered and that students actually do improve. It seems that reading programs spend a great deal of time testing the students in an effort to justify the continuance of the project. Yet too often these test scores are not used until the end of the school year when the student is again tested and the test data are compared. The average teacher is uncertain of the true meaning of these test scores and often does not know how to use them to their best advantage. As a result, he continues to teach his class as he has done in the past, with little, if any, attempt to group his students according to their ability levels and then provide them with something that remotely resembles individualized instruction. Reading consultants and reading teachers seem to enjoy testing for its own sake or for the excuse it affords them to remain sequestered in their paper-strewn offices while compiling tables of data and contriving new occasions to test the already heavily-laden students.

To complicate matters further, the responsibility for teaching reading often falls upon the English teacher, who is considered by the remainder of the faculty to be the one who is solely

responsible for the present lamentable situation and who offers the best hope for a speedy solution. To argue that the teaching of reading is the responsibility and the duty of every subject teacher is to belabor the obvious. Since many schools do not have remedial programs which can improve the ability of the students to read sufficiently well to succeed in school, the task of improving the students' skills then rests by default with the teacher of English, whether he is prepared for it or not. It is his task to make the best of a bad situation and to muster the available resources to give the students the opportunity which they deserve. Developmental reading, that is, the ability to interpret and apply what has been read, has long been within the domain of the English class and offers few new challenges to the experienced teacher. However, remedial reading or the teaching of the ability to decode and comprehend demands new approaches, taxing the skills and ingenuity of the teacher. If any teacher is to successfully respond to the challenge, he must be willing to expend a great deal of energy and patience on a tedious, difficult task.

To be distressingly honest, most of those currently certified as English teachers have little, if any, background in the teaching of reading. Teachers' colleges yearly turn out a crop of graduates who are able to interpret Shakespeare and explicate Milton but who are unable to teach the most basic of all skills, reading. The heavy emphasis of the colleges on literature is based on the assumption that the students in the schools can and do read. Today this premise is no longer indisputable. The ability to ferret out the archetypal imagery in Melville does not guarantee that a teacher can impart to his students the elusive sounds of the short vowels. It would be the obvious solution if colleges were to require that a minimum number of credits be taken in reading courses. Such practical requirements would insure that new teachers would be adequately prepared to face the overwhelming problems of dealing with nonreaders. However, even if such requirements became universally accepted tomorrow, it would require four years for the current freshman class to graduate and filter into the schools. Such a long delay is intolerable and offers no hope for the immediate problem.

It is clearly evident that each teacher of English must tackle the problem in his own classroom on a day-to-day basis. If the school offers no assistance or material encouragement, he must draw upon his proverbial bag of tricks to provide the students with the opportunity to learn how to read and to instill in them the desire to improve themselves. It remains the responsibility of the classroom teacher to overcome the two greatest obstacles to any smoothly-functioning school program, apathy and absenteeism. Those students who would benefit most from added reading instruction are often the most poorly motivated and offer chronic attendance problems which seem to defy any easy solution. The greatest potential for changing students' attitudes lies with the teacher who is genuinely interested and contagiously enthusiastic. Students easily see through the motives of their instructors and are quick to sense a teacher's sincerity. Perhaps the best approach is a straightforward admission of the aims and purpose of teaching methods. For many students, the remedial programs of the ninth and tenth grades represent the last time that the student will be given a chance to improve his deficiencies. If he does not utilize this last opportunity, he will either move back into the mainstream of the school where he will undoubtedly fail or else he will become one of the increasing number of dropouts. Most students are keenly aware of their limitations and will strive to improve if they understand exactly what is to be done and if they are given the opportunity to succeed in small tasks which lie within their potential. By telling the students that they *will* improve in reading if they make an effort to participate in classwork and attend school regularly, the teacher is able to reinforce the relevancy of the program in his students' minds.

Of course each person will strive to achieve more when he sees that his labors are paying off in the form of satisfactory grades. To achieve this end, a daily quiz which embraces materials previously covered offers an opportunity to bolster the student's image and to review past lessons without the student's being aware of what is actually taking place. These daily reviews should last no more than five minutes and should form the major part of the final grade for the course. In addition to forming a record of the student's consistent performance, such a device serves the dual pur-

pose of settling down disruptive or restless students at the very beginning of the class. Since disciplinary problems seem to run rampant in reading classes, the advantages of such a technique are obvious. These daily quizzes require no elaborate preparation and may be improvised by the instructor as he administers them. Beginning each class with such a quiz lets the students see that they are being held responsible for the material covered and often improves their attention for the remainder of the class. Once the class is well underway, it is imperative that the teacher remember that in most instances these students have extremely short attention spans. This should be kept in mind as the teacher prepares his daily lesson plans. Each class period should contain several different and contrasting work tasks so that the tempo of the class remains sufficiently brisk to avoid boredom and student inattention. This variety of activities may include the use of formal worksheets to supplement the teacher's lecture and to expand the students' written skills which are often as severely retarded as their reading skills. The worksheets should be rather brief so that the student is able to easily finish this task. Most students enjoy doing written work if only for the sense of accomplishment which follows the completion of a given exercise.

Another most useful tactic in a reading class is a brief period of dictation. In addition to improving the auditory discrimination of the students, such an exercise also reinforces the emphasis on writing skills which has been initiated by the use of daily quizzes and worksheets. Accuracy is the primary aim of these dictations, but neatness and legibility should also count for a great deal. Messy papers should be recopied, perhaps as a homework assignment. If these daily exercises are kept in a folder by each student, he will be able to observe his progress and take some degree of pride in his achievements. Daily dictations are particularly valuable with black and Spanish-speaking students since it enables the teacher to expose the students to such subtle and difficult sounds as the -ed verb ending and the plural forms of nouns, sounds which are completely alien to some students. Dictation should last no more than ten minutes each day and should gracefully lead to some other form of class activity.

Common errors on each day's dictation may provide the basis for an improvised lesson on verb tenses or formation of the plural. If the students are required to keep simple daily notes in some sort of notebook which may be checked regularly by the teacher, his participation in the class is likely to improve. Initially, students may rebel at such a regimented procedure, but if the teacher is firmly insistent about the matter even the most recalcitrant students will eventually comply. Inherent in the teaching of reading is the teaching of good work habits. The more we expect of students, the higher their performance level is likely to be.

Of course no teacher will ignore the possibilities of exploiting the natural competitiveness of the students. All sorts of games, either commercial or teacher-made, may be utilized to remove from the reading class the atmosphere of the deadly dull. Games serve as excellent fillers when only a few minutes remain in the period. If the blackboard can be used in such games as hangman, the participation of the students is virtually insured and the lessons are doubly reinforced. Students can be asked to compile lists of rhyming words, words that begin with a certain blend or digraph, or words that contain certain vowel sounds. Keeping a running tally of the scores adds interest and zest to the proceedings.

In spite of their obvious sophistication in certain matters, nearly all students enjoy working on various projects. One such project asks the students to create booklets which deal with specific themes such as love, war, football. Working alone or in small groups, students assemble their own collage of pictures illustrating the central theme of the project and then draw up a list of words which seem to belong to their particular idea. If the finished projects are displayed prominently in the classroom, the students are able to see their work paying off in concrete recogition and good work habits are thus reinforced. Possible projects are limited only by the imagination and ingenuity of the teacher. The attraction of colored paper, scissors, and tape should not, in any case, be underestimated as a teaching tool in the reading program of any school. Whether these projects are done in the class or as an outside assignment is a moot question. However, it would seem imperative that some sort of daily assignment be

given that is to be completed at home. Even if the work is as mechanical as copying, neatly, a list of words used in class, there are certain advantages to be gained from a regular schedule of homework. Perhaps the most important feature is that it lets the student know that he is mature enough to handle extra work on his own. This sense of responsibility does much to create a favorable self image for the retarded reader. If some sort of public chart is posted in the classroom where the number of assignments turned in can be recorded, the teacher is again able to capitalize on the inherent competitiveness of all students.

In any reading class, the list of materials to be covered is endless and the techniques which can be used are innumerable. The key considerations in teaching any class, and especially important ones in a class of slow readers, are tempo and variety. The class must proceed at a pace which is sufficiently brisk so that no student can afford to become disengaged. Constant repetition is essential, but this somewhat limits the amount of material which can be covered in any given class period. To ward off boredom, the teacher must plan for a variety of activities, at least three totally different tasks to be completed during every class. Fifteen minutes would be the maximum amount of time which should be spent on any assignment. Student interest can be had but only if the teacher is willing to expend a great deal of time and energy so that the lesson flows smoothly throughout the entire period. Such a technique is not easily gained, but it will evolve if the teacher is patient and well-motivated.

Exercises which have as their goal the development of basic skills must give way eventually to actual reading. It is imperative that the student be given the chance to practice what he has learned and so reading selections which are neither too long nor too difficult must be supplied at frequent intervals to supplement regular class exercises. If the material is too difficult for the students to read unassisted, the teacher should read the passages aloud while the class follows along in student copies. Since the task of the instructor is to improve the attitude of his students towards reading, technical analysis of the selection should be subordinated to an appreciation of the material for its own sake.

Later, when the students are more firmly committed to the value of reading, a more formal approach can replace this casual initial encounter with the printed page. If teachers botch this most important phase of any reading program, there is little use in continuing any sort of remedial instruction.

Students can be taught to read and often, in spite of their protestations to the contrary, really desire to master the skills needed to become a competent reader. There is no easy solution to the problem, but a fruitful approach lies in the ability of the teacher to interact with his students and to achieve ultimately a cordial atmosphere where, to some degree, true learning can take place. It is no cliche to say that a dedicated teacher can inspire his students with the desire to learn. Rather it is a truth to which we must all admit if we are to correct the apathetic nature of many of our students. To teach reading is to expose the student to a world of new experiences with which he must deal if he is to live happily and securely. It is the teacher's task to make the student aware of the potential which lies within him and which continually surrounds him. Such is the ultimate justification of any program which seeks to teach reading.